

Bill Countryman  
FEAR AND LOVE  
21st Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 22A: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Good Shepherd Berkeley  
October 5, 2008

"Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." (Exod. 20:20)

So how does that work for you?

Sometimes it works pretty well, doesn't it? If not literally the fear of God, then at least the fear of our parents, our friends, our neighbors, the police, the government . . . It's probably stopped more than one of us from doing at least one thing we were kind of tempted by. And it does seem to be one basic way we learn to take moral considerations seriously.

Interestingly, there's been quite a lot of research lately into the evolutionary and physiological foundations of morality. It isn't just a matter of fear. And it doesn't start just with human beings. Our simian kin have some pretty definite rules of moral behavior. Some of our own sense of fairness and our ability to empathize with others appears to be hard-wired in our brains.

You might think that this would make ethical behavior almost, well, natural. And it is sometimes. But there's apparently no guarantee that we'll always follow our better nature, as it were. Even our fellow apes are known to deceive one another.

It seems as if knowing the good also means we know how to choose the opposite. If you have a notion of truth, you also know how to lie. If you have a notion of fairness, you also know how to be grasping and selfish. Maybe this is what the story in Genesis 2-3 means by saying that our first parents ate the fruit from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." You can't have the one without the other.

Now, with or without the fear, it's easy enough to recognize the Ten Commandments as a basic description of right behavior. People have done it for thousands of years. To be sure, they were framed in terms their original audience could understand, which means they don't all work in exactly the same terms in our own time and place.

Christians, for example, have almost never taken the commandment not to work on Saturday seriously. (Sometimes, it sounds like a good idea in our over-worked era; but we still don't do

it.) And while the prohibition of coveting still has value, the way the tenth commandment treats wives as a kind of property just has to go.

Still, we can recognize what they're getting at, and they're still not a bad guide for reflection if we can see past the details to the general principles involved. They say, "Have reverence for the fact that life and the world are bigger than you are. You're not god; pay attention! Respect those who have brought you into the world and those who help you turn into a responsible adult. Treat one another with fairness and honesty."

But what about this fear thing? We've already said it works sometimes, but not always. Jesus' parable this morning is about how badly the whole thing can fail. The tenants behave in a completely crazy way. In their world, as in most, the landlord is sure to have more clout than they. Yet, they refuse to pay their rent and they mistreat one representative after another. When the landlord gives them one last chance by sending the son and heir, the tenants tell themselves, "Ah, the heir! If we kill him, there'll be no one left to claim the property and it will be ours!"

How stupid can you get? What kind of world could that happen in? How about a little healthy fear here? Nope, they do exactly what comes into their heads and are surprised when the landlord shows up and kills them all.

Well, welcome to the club. It's amazing how foolish we humans can become when we're just desperate to get our way or to pursue some fascination that's taken hold on us. I haven't seen the Darwin Awards lately, but they bear it out. Those of us managing to more or less maintain ourselves in responsible middle-class existence figure we're less inclined than others to ignore basic prudence. But the debacles of the mortgage industry, Wall Street, and the hedge funds are clear evidence that education and success are no guarantees against folly—even criminal folly.

And *then* a person really does have something to fear: loss of status, respect, income; maybe a term in jail. All of that, you might think, would have been obvious enough at the beginning of the fraud and had some deterrent effect, but no . . .

Jesus tells this story in the presence of the hierarchy and the theology professors in Jerusalem, people one might presume would be conscious of the fear of God. And they know right away that he's talking about them. And what's their response? Do they remember there's a commandment against murder? No. They try to get rid of him. What holds them back? Fear. But not fear of God, fear of the

crowds who see Jesus as a prophet. They're just waiting for their chance.

The scenario is familiar. Jesus' parable only highlights it by making it more extreme. The religious officials could recognize themselves in it, but it didn't deter them.

We probably can't do without the fear of God—or at least the fear of getting caught and punished by *somebody*. But it doesn't get us all that far. When confronted with the truth about our greed and passion and dishonesty and mistreatment of one another, our impulse is to attack the truth-teller rather than to repent. We would like to think that we are above all that, but in our heart of hearts we know that we haven't yet reached that level of perfection.

It's really quite extraordinary how the readings this morning interlock with each other. They really weren't chosen to do that, but sometimes the great themes in scripture just break through in unexpected ways.

And so I turn last to our reading from Philippians. Paul tells us what a good person he was: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee . . ."

He's not talking about what a good Jew he was, though of course he speaks in Jewish terms. He's talking about what a good *religious* person he was: "as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Here, if anywhere, is a person who has taken the fear of God seriously. His parents got him started in the right way, and he's kept right on, always taking care to do exactly what was called for, one eye on the wrath of God.

And what did it make of him? Here we learn the real limitation and the real problem of fear. Between "as to the law, a Pharisee" and "as to righteousness under the law, blameless," he sandwiches in "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church." Again, this is not a Jew vs. Christian issue. It's an issue of basic human morality. What did all his efforts to be perfect turn him into? A person of decency and generosity? No, a persecutor.

A morality that has nothing to support it but fear not only fails to deter us from evil, it may actually promote it. Fear can become a fascination in its own right, both the feeling of it and the inflicting of it. We see it all around us in various forms of religious fundamentalism. The effort to discipline oneself by the fear of God turns imperceptibly into an effort to discipline others by making

them fear us. This is the great ugliness of fundamentalism, the quality that makes fundamentalism so destructive of human life and community.

Paul was good at fearing God. And it turned him into a persecutor. That could easily have been the end of the story; in fact, it often is. But Paul discovered something else, something better. He discovered that fear is at most a stopgap in God's relationship with us. It's a way to get *started* on the process of growing into real human beings, but it won't take you very far.

What is required to grow into real human maturity, the kind of maturity we see in the true saints, is not fear, but love. Paul learned that the holiness he aimed at he could receive only as a gift.

That meant that, in some sense, a lot of his earlier life had been wasted. He had been trying so hard to obey the rules and had only been hardened by it. That seems like a terrible thing to discover.

But the discovery of God's love changed things so dramatically for him that he didn't care. "Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. . . For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . . "

That's the language of a lover, not a fearer, not a fundamentalist. Sometimes we get angry with Paul because he can be so insistent on having his own way. Yes, well, we none of us change overnight. As he himself goes on to say, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

That's the center of Paul. The rest is incidental. Fear may be a starting point. But only love can take us to the consummation of human existence. Only love can lead us into real human maturity.

That's what Paul says. And that's what he invites us into—or, rather, what God invites us into through him and through all the saints.

Thanks be to God.